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***NOUVELLE THEOLOGIE AND SACRAMENTAL ONTOLOGY: A RETURN TO MYSTERY* by Hans Boersma, *Oxford University Press*, 2009, pp. xvi+325, \$120 hbk**

This study offers a broad yet careful and scholarly survey of *nouvelle théologie*, seeking to argue that the key to appreciating its true character lies in understanding its ‘sacramental ontology’. Chapter 1 presents what Boersma regards as its founding problematic: a rupture between theology and life which, in practical terms, tended to exclude everyday activities and concerns from theological consideration. Chapter 2 assesses some of the movement’s precursors: Möhler, Blondel, Maréchal and Rousselot, rightly identifying them as grappling, in different ways, with the Kantian legacy. In Chapter 3, the supernatural–natural relationship in de Lubac and Bouillard is reviewed, the latter being particularly informative given that his fruitful concept of the ‘relative autonomy’ of the individual vis-à-vis God is little-known. In Chapter 4 the locus shifts to Balthasar and Chenu, and various themes including incarnation, participation and desacralization are explored. Spiritual interpretation of scripture is the topic of Chapter 5, in which de Lubac’s and Daniélou’s difference over the respective priority of allegorical and typological exegesis is well-presented. The nature of tradition and its ecclesial role is explored in Chapter 6, where the important work of Louis Charlier on doctrinal development is assessed alongside that of more prominent thinkers. Chapter 7 focuses on the sacramental ecclesiologies of de Lubac and Congar, rightly resisting simplistic assumptions such as that Congar intended his pneumatology to exalt the laity and diminish the role of the ordained hierarchy.

Boersma traverses a lot of ground, and his study would therefore serve as a useful introduction to *nouvelle théologie* that will undoubtedly deserve a place on reading lists as interest in the movement spreads in teaching institutions. Moreover, the reader senses his excitement, writing as an evangelical, at many openings encountered along the way that are at least as suggestive for his own tradition as for Catholicism. As an ecumenical engagement this is deeply impressive, although its implications remain largely unstated. How might the Catholic recovery of sacramental theology now aid evangelicalism? How might evangelicals learn from the rich Catholic tradition of the spiritual exegesis of scripture, and where does it leave the classic *sola scriptura* principle? More specifically, how should the relationship between allegorical and moral interpretation be construed? How might the aims of *nouvelle théologie* and its communal yet international character help Catholics understand the Reformation better?

Employing a largely synthetic approach, the book does not offer much critical assessment of the contrasts between different figures and positions gathered together under the broad *nouvelle théologie* category, such as might have been expected from an author who had lived longer with the issues and tensions. Although distinctions are drawn and polemics noted, the reader gains little sense of which elements of *nouvelle théologie* are more important to the author’s project than others. Furthermore, the most obvious objection to Boersma’s thesis that *nouvelle théologie* renewed the Church’s sacramental sensibility and its sense of mystery is not addressed: that, at the same time as sacramentality and mystery have been promoted in abstract theological discourse, the liturgy as actually experienced has been shorn of precisely these core elements. In Paris today, one is more likely to experience a sense of tangible liturgical mystery when attending Orthodox or Anglo-Catholic worship than in many Catholic services. Surprisingly, neither of those traditions features in Boersma’s study, in which non-Catholics are all seemingly classified as Protestant.

Some readers will no doubt approach this book hoping for a deepened understanding of sacramental ontology. Certainly, much historical material and summary of apposite texts is provided. Moreover, it seems that sacramental ontology is relevant to many diverse fields of *nouvelle théologie*. In the course of the book, all of the following are cited as aspects of

such an ontology: sign–reality correspondence, reconnecting theology with life, love as mediating the natural–supernatural dichotomy, materiality as a locus for divine self-communication, the priority and ultimacy of the divine life, nature as supernaturally oriented, nature and the supernatural as closely connected, participation, analogical predication, recognising the transcendent in sensible things, experience as a source of theology, incarnational theology, spiritual exegesis, typological exegesis, an ecclesial conception of time, willingness to integrate pagan religions, accepting the psychological grounds of doctrinal affirmation, language as a vehicle for divine truth, pneumatological ecclesiology, and liturgy as a bearer of tradition. What is lacking, however, is any systematic theological assessment of the concept of sacramental ontology evinced in all these instances, or its relation to the equally diffuse concept of ‘mystery’. As a result, no conceptual synthesis is reached. ‘The Tradition’ or even ‘the great Tradition’ is sometimes invoked as a normative source, but this gives a false impression of resolution because it is not made clear what hermeneutic should be used to construct this. Texts like de Lubac’s *Corpus Mysticum* are inherently unstable, frequently diffuse, and predominantly descriptive, often leaving their concrete implications largely unstated. The authors of these texts acknowledge, through their silences, the range of possible interpretations of the tradition out of which they write. The future for theological engagements with *nouvelle théologie* surely lies in constructive efforts to understand key terms such as those which Boersma introduces in this readable overview, and thereby to speak into some of these silences.